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What Caused Rash Of Cancer Scares?

We didn't hear much yelping from Tar Heels when Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Arthur S. Flemming tossed his pre-Thanksgiving cranberry scare at the nation — possibly because cranberries are a more or less minor crop in North Carolina.

But the blast by Surgeon Gen. Leroy E. Burney against cigarettes as the main cause of lung cancer is quite another story. Tobacco is North Carolina's big crop.

We don't know how many persons were affected by the cranberry scare, but there are approximately 58 million smokers in the United States. We doubt if many of them will give up cigarettes in time for Christmas solely on the Surgeon General's warning.

Carl T. Hicks, a farmer and president of the Tobacco Growers Information Committee in Carolina has launched a strong counter-attack. He charges that Burney's conclusions as written in the Journal of the American Medical Assoc., are based on "the same old worn-out statistical studies" that have never proved conclusively that cigarettes have any direct connection with lung cancer.

Of course, the Surgeon General admitted that there are other factors which contribute to the cause — such as air pollution. The major sources of air pollution are exhaust products of gasoline and diesel engines — a point we made in a recent editorial.

Burney further admitted that the lung cancer incident is higher in urban areas than in rural areas where air pollution is considerably less.

We don't doubt for one moment that there are a awful lot of cigarette smokers among the tobacco farmers and their families in North Carolina. Yet we don't recall that the incident of lung cancer is particularly high among them.

We are certainly all for cancer research. We hope that one day this dread disease will be stamped out entirely, or at least brought to the point where it can be controlled.

But until the experts have definite proof as to what actually causes lung cancer, we think they would do well to get off the publicity train.

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Mixed Reception

Whatever else can be said for the federal government, it keeps life from getting dull.

The controversy over cranberries had not grown cold before the surgeon general of the United States was out with a warning of growing evidence which he says links smoking with lung cancer.

The reaction was immediate. The tobacco industry, as might be expected, set up a long loud howl. Tobacco shares on Wall Street were off several points. The smokers are yet to be heard from.

The tobacco-cancer case is nothing new. Quite the contrary. It is several years old and the surgeon general appears to have presented little new in the way of statistical information except to state his beliefs in stronger terms.

The government has a responsibility to warn citizens of anything which might affect the public health. It also has a responsibility to be direct and conclusive in its warnings and certainly it has the facilities to prove its points before reaching for the panic button.

Whether it's cranberries or cigarets, it appears the government has been something less than conclusive and is not too certain at times of its own findings. Until it is, there will be a mixed reception for them and more than lingering doubt in the minds of many.

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